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SUBJECT: GAZA UPDATE JANUARY 16, 2009, 1300 LOCAL

¶1. (SBU) Summary. The IDF drew back from some parts of Gaza City on the morning of January 16 after heavy fighting and airstrikes killed a number of militants and civilians, primarily in the Tel al-Hawa and Zaytun neighborhoods. An IAF airstrike in northern Gaza City killed Hamas leader Said Siam, along with family members and militants. Airstrikes and skirmishes continued in southern Gaza, near Khan Yunis and along the Rafah border area. A "humanitarian pause" took place 1000-1400. Gaza-based medical sources reported a total of 1,105 killed and at least 4,850 wounded since IDF operations began. Israel beefed up security in the West Bank and East Jerusalem January 16. End summary.

IDF Draws Back from Tel al-Hawa Neighborhood

¶2. (SBU) The IDF drew back from parts of Gaza City on the morning of January 16. Tanks had advanced as far as Own al-Shawa Street in the western neighborhood of Tel al-Hawa on January 15 and were reported near Omar al-Mukhtar Street. On the evening of January 15, IDF troops surrounded Abraj al-Hawa, a high-rise residential compound, ordering residents to stay in one room of each apartment as they searched the building. IDF soldiers detained hundreds of male residents of Tel al-Hawa, and removed dozens for questioning as they withdrew from the neighborhood on January 16. IDF soldiers clashed with militants and fired shells in the Zaytun neighborhood January 15-16. ICRC staff in Gaza reported that members of the Dughmush clan refused to vacate ICRC's Gaza City office the morning of January 16 after breaking in late January 15.

Hamas Leader Killed in Airstrike

¶3. (SBU) Hamas and the GOI confirmed that an IAF airstrike killed Said Siam, Hamas's "interior minister," along with Siam's son and brother and seven other militants, in the northern Gaza City neighborhood of Shaykh Radwan the evening of January 15. Siam was Hamas's third-ranking Gaza-based leader, and was instrumental in the Hamas takeover of the Gaza Strip in June 2007. Hamas official Mohammad Nazal publicly stated that the incident proves that Hamas leaders are not hiding in bunkers and have not abandoned their people. He said Siam's death will not weaken Hamas.

Fighting Continues in Northern Gaza

¶4. (SBU) The IDF shelled several neighborhoods in Bayt Lahiya January 15-16, including homes of militants, and other locations in northern Gaza.

Airstrikes and ground operations in Southern Gaza

¶5. (SBU) Gaza-based sources and press reported that IAF airstrikes hit a car in Khan Yunis and destroyed smuggling tunnels along the Rafah border area January 16. According to Palestinian medical sources, a 14-year old Palestinian was killed and another person

injured by Israeli shelling at a market in al-Shabura refugee camp in Rafah. A 22-year old Palestinian was seriously wounded by Israeli forces in the town of Abassan.

¶6. (SBU) The mayor of al-Fakhari (southeast of Khan Yunis) told ConGen that 90 percent of al-Fakhari's approximately 10,000 residents have fled, some to a school serving as a refuge north of al-Fakhari, others to a "European hospital" near al-Fakhari, and the remainder to Khan Yunis. The mayor said 60 residents of al-Fakhari are holed up in a house without food and water, but are afraid to leave with Israeli tanks and Israeli snipers positioned on rooftops. They have asked for ICRC assistance to evacuate.

Rockets Continue

¶7. (SBU) Press reported at least ten rockets fired into Israel from Gaza January 16 as of 1300 local, causing no casualties but damaging some property. Press reported 26 rockets from Gaza landed in Israel January 15, one of which injured six people in Be'er Sheva, including one seriously.

Casualties

¶8. (SBU) Gaza-based medical sources told the press that 71 Palestinians died January 15-16, and at least 300 were wounded. The sources estimated that 1,105 Palestinians have been killed since IDF operations began (including at least 333 children, 93 women, 13 paramedics, and three journalists), and that 4,850 people have required medical treatment for injuries (including at least 1,549 children and 652 women).

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"Humanitarian Pause"

¶9. (SBU) A "humanitarian pause" occurred from 1000-1400 local January 16. The UN and Gaza-based contacts said fighting and shelling decreased during the pause, and some Gazans were able to move throughout the city in search of supplies. Press reported on January 16 that the UNRWA food supplies destroyed at the shelled Gaza City warehouse on January 15 were worth millions of U.S. dollars. Fire trucks escorted by the IDF to the warehouse the evening of January 15 were too late to save these supplies.

Political Developments

¶10. (SBU) In a January 15 news conference, President Abbas called Israel's shelling of the UNRWA compound in Gaza City "outrageous." In a separate news conference, PM Fayyad urged the UNSC to adopt a binding resolution under Chapter 7 authority to enforce UNSCR 1860 and emphasized the importance of the Egyptian initiative. Fayyad called the Israeli operation in Gaza unjustifiable and a "grave escalation."

¶11. (SBU) Senior Hamas official Musa Abu Marzuq said publicly that Hamas will not make concessions on its demands for a cease-fire. He called on Abbas to stop negotiations with Israel, for the Arab League (AL) to sever ties with Israel, and for West Bankers to demonstrate in support of Hamas. PA sources said Hamas representatives told Egypt that Hamas would accept a year-long renewable cease-fire and PA forces at the Rafah terminal if Israel withdraws its forces immediately and Hamas has a visible role at Rafah. Hamas remains opposed to an international force in Gaza. The PA sources said Hamas is waiting for Israel to respond to its proposal via Egypt.

¶12. (SBU) Qatar will host a summit January 15. President Abbas will not attend the summit, but will attend a previously scheduled AL meeting in Kuwait January 19 which will discuss the situation in Gaza

West Bank Reaction and Security

¶13. (SBU) Hamas called on West Bankers to demonstrate in support of Gazans January 16, calling it a "day of rage". Israel imposed a full closure on the West Bank from the evening of January 15 through midnight January 17 and deployed thousands of border police around East Jerusalem January 16 to prevent possible incidents. Israeli police closed the al-Aqsa compound to males under the age of 45. PASF were on high alert January 16 to prevent protesters from clashing with the IDF, but some incidents of stone throwing and Molotov cocktails were reported. Settlers reportedly threw stones and empty bottles at Palestinians near Nablus, damaging several cars. The IDF arrested seven Palestinians across the West Bank January 15-16.

WALLES